

The old frigate Minnesota /

David L. Kingsbury.

THE OLD FRIGATE MINNESOTA.*

* Read at the monthly meeting of the Executive Council, September 12, 1904.

BY DAVID L. KINGSBURY.

THE STEERING-WHEEL DONATED TO THIS SOCIETY.

The receipt of the steering-wheel of the United States steam frigate Minnesota, by this Society from the Secretary of the Navy, suggested that something concerning her history would be of interest to the members of the society and the citizens of the state for which she was named, and which she honored by her record.

The acquisition of the wheel by this society originated through correspondence by Mr. Edwin S. Chittenden, of this city, with Senator Moses E. Clapp, in which Mr. Chittenden suggested securing the figurehead, on learning that the old frigate was to be sold, or had been sold, to the highest bidder for old junk. Senator Clapp, in a letter to Mr. Chittenden, dated February 4, 1902, wrote as follows: "I find that it is going to be impossible to get the figurehead of the old 'Minnesota,' as the department has determined that it shall be a part of the Naval Archives. The best I can do is, possibly, to get the steering-wheel. If you think they [the society] would care for that, let me know." To this Mr. Chittenden replied, "I have been assured that they [the society] would be pleased to obtain, through your efforts, any part of the old vessel; the wheel is surely a very important and interesting portion, and I should think it second in interest alone to the figurehead."

Library of Congress

On February 21, 1902, Senator Clapp again wrote: "The Secretary of the Navy is having the proper steps taken to provide for the sale of the wheel, which has to be done where 86 authority of Congress is granted to donate it, and I have introduced a resolution authorizing the donation of the wheel." On March 27, 1902, Senator Clapp wrote: "I think the 'wheel' matter will go through all right; I got it through the Senate without trouble." June 19, 1902, he says, "In regard to the steering-wheel, it has gone to the House, and Stevens is looking after it." The foregoing is but a small part of the correspondence, during the past two years, pertaining to the acquisition of the wheel; but it is sufficient to show the interest of the movement, and it is only necessary to add that the bill authorizing the donation of the wheel passed both branches of Congress, by which the Secretary of the Navy was given authority to send it to the Minnesota Historical Society. The wheel was received August 18, 1904.

BUILDING THE FRIGATE.

On April 6, 1854, Congress passed the following act.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Secretary of the Navy be, and he is hereby, authorized to cause to be constructed for the United States Navy, at as early a day as practicable, consistently with a due regard for economy and efficiency, six first-class steam-frigates, to be provided with screw-propellers, and properly armed and equipped for service; said vessels and machinery to be built by contract, or in government navy yards, as the Secretary of the Navy may think most advisable for the public interest.

Section 2. **And be it further enacted,** That there be, and is hereby appropriated, to be expended under the direction of the Secretary of the Navy, for the purpose above specified, and for altering, completing, and launching the frigates Santee, at Kittery, and Sabine, at New York, the sum of three millions of dollars, out of any money in the treasury not otherwise appropriated.

Library of Congress

Approved April 6, 1854.

The six frigates constructed under this act were the Merrimac (later converted by the Confederates into an ironclad and called the Virginia), the Wabash, the Minnesota, the Roanoke, the Colorado, and the Niagara. The last named, however, was not properly a frigate, but a sloop of war. In these days, when the cost of a single battleship equals, or exceeds, the cost of the six, with the repairing of two, the amount appropriated seems insignificant.

87

The total cost of the Minnesota, including armament, was \$691,408.14; her engines and boilers cost \$169,786.34, nearly twenty-five per cent of the whole. Her keel must have been laid soon after the appropriation was made, as we find her reported on the stocks in the navy yard at Washington in December, 1854. The following is the official description of the vessel:

Builder, Government; material, wood; length from knightheads to taffrail, two hundred and eighty-five feet, five inches; length between perpendiculars, two hundred and sixty-four feet; breadth molded, fifty feet and two inches; breadth, extreme, fifty-one feet and two inches; depth of hold, twenty-six feet and two and one-half inches; propulsion, screw; rig, ship; the area of the ten principal sails, consisting of the courses, topsails, top jib sails, top gallant sails, jib and spanker, two thousand three hundred and ninety-eight feet; tonnage, three thousand two hundred.

The engines were built at the Washington Navy Yard from designs prepared by Engineer-in-Chief D. B. Martin, and were of the Penn trunk style, of two horizontal cylinders of seventy-nine and one-half inches diameter and three and one-half feet stroke, the trunks being thirty-three inches in diameter. There were four furnace Martin's vertical water tube boilers of iron, except the tubes which were brass; the grate surface of all boilers, three hundred and thirty-three and one-half square feet; and total heating surface, twelve

Library of Congress

thousand five hundred and thirty-seven square feet. The single smokestack was eight feet in diameter. Propeller was a two-bladed true screw of brass, seventeen feet in diameter, twenty-three feet pitch, made to disconnect and hoist up in a well in the stern. Speed, steam and sail, twelve and one-half knots per hour. Coal per hour, six hundred and twenty-eight pounds.

Battery: two ten-inch pivot guns on spar deck, bow and stern; fourteen eight-inch guns on spar deck; twenty-four nine-inch guns on gun deck; total weight of main battery, with side tackles, etc., one hundred and seventy-nine tons.

LAUNCHING THE FRIGATE.

The Minnesota was launched on December 1, 1855, one year, seven months and twenty-four days after the act authorizing her construction. Under the conditions existing at that time, this can be considered rapid work. The Secretary of the Navy, Hon. James C. Dobbin, in his report for 1854, mentions the difficulty of obtaining seasoned timber, as there was but a small amount at the various navy yards.

88

Under date of December 15, 1855, the following brief notice of the launching appears in the Daily Minnesotian:

The United States Steam Frigate Minnesota was launched at Washington Navy Yard on the 1st. She passed off handsomely. Miss Mann, of Boston, had the honor of christening the noble ship, and breaking on her bow a bottle of Guy's best. She glided into the watery element freighted with human life.

This does not quite agree with the description of the event given in the Daily National Intelligencer, of December 3d, which follows:

It was on the cloudless, balmy day of Saturday that the most superb specimen of marine architecture ever attempted by the naval constructors and artisans of our city was launched into the broad and beautiful Anacostia. Before the appointed hour thousands of persons, of both sexes and of all classes of society, had assembled in the Navy Yard, and on house-tops and every eligible point of view in the neighborhood, to witness the first visit of the noble "Minnesota" to that element which is in future to be her home. Patiently the large crowd awaited the termination of the preliminary arrangements until about one o'clock, when music, cheers, and a salute of twenty-one guns, announced the arrival of the President. Shortly afterwards, the steamer "Engineer" received on board the President, his Cabinet, and a number of invited guests, and took his station in the stream in a favorable position for seeing the launch.

As the hour wore on and the sound of the removal of the props was heard over the water, the interest became more earnest, until at about half past two a signal gun boomed forth. Then all became silently attentive until the majestic ship glided slowly into the water, and, burying herself nearly to her stern ports as if in homage, rose as easily and gracefully as a swan upon the swell, and came to rest without a strain,—able to challenge the severest criticism, a very leviathan upon the waters. Just before the ship reached the water, a young lady of this city baptised her in the customary mode by the name of "Minnesota," with water brought from that river by the Hon. Mr. Rice, of Minnesota Territory. Very few ladies sufficiently overcame their apprehensions to trust themselves on board, though any dread of danger must soon have been lost in pride at the unmarred success of the launch and the superb appearance of this latest triumph of our naval architecture and mechanical skill. Well may all connected with her construction be felicitated upon the successful issue of their labors; and we are sure that none of our citizens present at this beautiful spectacle will ever cease to follow the course of the splendid Minnesota with interest and pride.

Library of Congress

The question, how, and by whom, the frigate was named "Minnesota" naturally arises; for at that time Minnesota was a territory, and only seven years old. It may be presumed, however, that Hon. Henry M. Rice, then a delegate in Congress from Minnesota, suggested the name, and the description just read appears to leave no doubt as to Mr. Rice being the sponsor.

Frank M. Bennett, in his history of "The Steam Navy of the United States," has this to say of the "six first-class steam frigates, to be provided with screw propellers:"

These ships were all built by the Government at navy yards as follows: The Merrimac at Boston; the Wabash at Philadelphia; the Minnesota at Washington; the Roanoke and Colorado at Norfolk; and the Niagara at New York. The three first named were launched in 1855 and the three others in 1856, they being, when completed, the superiors of any war vessel then possessed by any nation in the world. When the first of them went abroad they became objects of admiration and envy to the naval architects of Europe, and their type was quickly copied into other navies, notably that of England, which imitated their construction in the Orlando, Mersey, and others of that class.

If it could have been foreseen that in seven years the utility of these model ships would be impaired, if not wholly destroyed, by a nondescript craft, a pygmy in comparison, called the Monitor, the creation of Captain John Ericsson, which revolutionized naval construction, their admiration and haste to imitate would have been qualified. But even now we must admit that, as things of beauty, they were more desirable to look upon than the fighting machines of today.

SERVICE IN THE EAST INDIES.

The first service of the Minnesota was on the East India station in 1857 and 1858, under command of Captain Samuel F. Du Pont, the Mississippi being the flagship of the squadron at the time. The East India squadron consisted of the steam frigates Powhatan,

Library of Congress

Captain George F. Pearson; Minnesota, Captain Samuel F. Du Pont; Mississippi, Captain William C. Nicholson; and a sloop of war, the Germantown, Commander 90 Richard L. Page. The flag officer was Josiah Tatnall, who in 1862 succeeded Captain Franklin Buchanan in command of the Merrimac, after the latter was wounded.

In October, 1857, this squadron was present at the capture of the Chinese forts on the Peiho. I have been unable to find a report of the outward voyage of the squadron, but did find a detailed account of the return of the Minnesota, which I append, believing it will be of interest.

The "Minnesota," returning to the United States, left Hong Kong with Mr. [William B.] Reed, late Minister to China, on board, and conveyed him to Bombay, where she arrived January 16, 1859. On her way she visited Singapore, in the Straits of Malacca, and Point de Galle and Colombo, in the island of Ceylon, and received the marked attention of the authorities of those places. At Bombay she was visited by the Governor and by the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of Western India.

February 20, 1859, she arrived at the coast of Muscat, and was immediately visited by the Sultan's chief secretary and interpreter, with offers of assistance. Captain Du Pont, with a suite of officers, waited on his highness' father, and expressed the hope and belief that the same friendly sentiments and uniform protection of American commerce would continue under his son and successor; and, as an evidence of the courteous and kind feelings entertained for the present Imam, or Sultan, he said the President of the United States had sent the largest vessel-of-war that had yet been to the Eastern World to visit his domains.

The Sultan was much gratified, and expressed his warm friendship for the United States of America, and his desire, not alone to protect our present trade, but to do all in his power to foster and increase it. He asked Captain Du Pont to accept a present of an Arabian steed

Library of Congress

and a jeweled sword, which was declined. Captain Du Pont sent him a Sharps rifle and a Colt's revolver and their accoutrements.

From Muscat the Minnesota proceeded to Cape Town; thence to Boston, where she arrived May 29, 1859.

SERVICE IN THE BEGINNING OF THE CIVIL WAR.

From the date of the arrival of the Minnesota at Boston, she appears to have been out of commission until April 4, 1861, when she was placed in commission by the following order of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, to Captain Silas H. Stringham.

Sir: You are relieved from duty as a member of the Naval Court-Martial now convened in this city, and also from special duty at Washington connected with the discipline of the service. You will proceed to Boston, Mass., and when the U. S. steam frigate Minnesota shall be put in commission you will hoist your flag on board that vessel and await the further instructions of this Department.

On April 11, 1861, Flag Officer Stringham announces his arrival at Boston, "and reports the ship in a rapid state of forwardness * * * * * with every probability of having her ready for the officers and crew in about fifteen days." On April 30 (Tuesday) he again writes: "The ship will be ready for her crew by Thursday. If possible, we shall sail on Saturday; think by Monday at furthest." He asks for a list of the vessels that will be ordered to report to him as attached to his command; the names will be given later on. May 1, 1861, the Secretary of the Navy sent the following order to Flag Officer Stringham.

Sir: Having been over fifty years in the service, and twenty as captain, you will hoist your flag at the fore instead of at the mizzen of the Minnesota. The Department in this instance suspends its general order of May 18, 1858, on the ground of your having seen nearly the requisite service as captain in the Navy, and as an honor to the Commander of the Coast Blockading Squadron.

Library of Congress

May 6th, 1861, Flag Officer Stringham acknowledges the receipt of the order giving him the command, and thanks the Secretary. He writes:

The flattering terms contained in your communication ordering me to hoist my flag at the fore instead of at the mizzen of the Minnesota, where I had placed it, can only be returned by the assurance that I will endeavor to merit the high honor conferred, both this mark of confidence of the Department and the much greater one of being appointed at this important time, in our country's hour of trial, as Commander of the Coast Blockading Squadron.

On May 8, 1861, Flag Officer Stringham informs the Department, "We left the wharf at the Navy Yard at about half past 8 o'clock this morning, and are now leaving the harbor."

May 13, 1861, 10 o'clock a. m., he informs the Department "that we have arrived and are now safely at anchor off Fortress Monroe after a moderate passage" (of five days). The vessels which at first composed the blockading squadron, as reported by Junior Flag Officer Garrett J. Pendergrast to Senior Flag Officer Stringham, were the Cumberland, Monticello, 92 Quaker City, steam tug Yankee, Harriet Lane, and steam tug Young America, and later this number was increased by the Niagara, Massachusetts, and South Carolina. The squadron was in active service immediately, for, on May 14, Flag Officer Stringham reports the capture of three schooners. Others were captured, but were released as "no prizes." The following were captured later, May 17 to July 10, 1861, and were condemned: Ship, North Carolina; schooners, Crenshaw and Sally Mears; barques, Hiawatha and Pioneer.

On May 17, the Secretary of the Navy writes to Flag Officer Stringham: "The name of your squadron will be the Atlantic Blockading Squadron, and it will be composed of the following named vessels, viz: Minnesota [flagship], Cumberland, Perry, Harriet Lane, Dawn, Monticello, Union, Reliance, Daylight, Mount Vernon, Penguin, Albatross, Wabash,

Library of Congress

and Commander [James H.] Ward's flotilla." This flotilla consisted of three improvised gunboats, the Freeborn, Anacostia, and Resolute.

May 30, 1861, Flag Officer Stringham reports the Minnesota off Charleston, S. C. Again on June 6, 1861, he reports the capture of the Savannah, a piratical schooner of about fifty tons, hailing from Charleston, S. C., with a commission from Jefferson Davis, dated Montgomery, May 13, 1861, commanded by T. Harrison Baker, with a crew of nineteen men. So far as can be learned, this was the first war vessel captured by the United States from the rebels. On July 10, the brig Amy Warwick was captured.

CAPTURE OF FORTS HATTERAS AND CLARK.

In August, 1861, the fleet under command of Flag Officer Stringham, attacking Forts Hatteras and Clark, comprised the following vessels: the flagship Minnesota, Captain Gershom J. Van Brunt; Wabash, Captain Samuel Mercer; Susquehanna, Captain John S. Chauncey; Pawnee, Commander Stephen C. Rowan; Monticello, Commander John P. Gillis; Harriet Lane, Captain John Faunce; and the Cumberland, a sailing ship, Captain John Martin. These seven armed vessels carried in all one hundred and forty-three guns. They 93 were accompanied by three transports, the Adelaide, George Peabody, and the Fanny, on which were embarked detachments of infantry from the Ninth and Twentieth New York Volunteers, and a company of the Second U. S. Artillery. This fleet set sail from Hampton Roads, Va., for Hatteras Inlet, N. C., August 26th, and arrived on the afternoon of the same day.

On the 28th, at 6:45 a. m., the troops, under command of General B. F. Butler, were disembarked; and at 10 o'clock the attack on Forts Hatteras and Clark commenced. The Wabash and Cumberland fired the first shots, after which the Minnesota passed inside of the Wabash and Cumberland and opened fire, followed by the combined fleet. At 6:45 p. m. the fleet ceased firing and withdrew for the night.

Library of Congress

On the 29th the engagement was renewed. The Minnesota again passed inside of the Wabash, anchoring between her and the Susquehanna, and opened fire. The enemy returned the fire throughout the engagement, but with no effect, their shot falling short. At 11 a. m. they displayed a white flag, and this ended the first engagement of importance in which the Minnesota took part. These forts were the first captured after the seceding of the Southern states.

In his official report of this engagement Flag Officer Stringham mentions this incident which happened on the Minnesota: "The Minnesotans yet talk of an incident which occurred on board this ship. J. D. Kraigbaum, in sponging a gun, unfortunately lost overboard his sponge; quick as thought he plunged overboard, grasped it, swam up to the port, and was helped in by his comrades. When asked by his officers why he did so rash an act, he replied he did not want his gun disgraced."

On September 2, 1861, the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, "congratulated Flag Officer Stringham and his command; also the officers and soldiers of the Army, on the reduction of Forts Hatteras and Clark and the capture of the forces employed in this defense. * * * * Accomplished without the loss of a man on his part, or injury to one in the Federal service, it has carried joy and gladness to the bosom of every friend of the Union."

94

In an account of the affair at Forts Hatteras and Clark by Bvt. Gen. Rush C. Hawkins, who participated in the engagement with the land forces, he mentions the naval tactics practiced for the first time by Flag Officer Stringham, for which he received no credit, "but when adopted by Du Pont, in a more brilliant affair, its merits were duly recognized. While Du Pont rose to the highest point in public estimation, Stringham was relegated to an obscure official background and never after held a service command." His old ship, the Minnesota, was but a few years later also "relegated to an obscure background," having, like her old commander, survived her usefulness.

Library of Congress

On September 1, 1861, Flag Officer Stringham reports from Hampton Roads, Va., the arrival of the Minnesota, twenty-six hours from New York. This shows that she must have sailed there immediately after the engagement of the 29th of August, although I find no account of it.

September 18, 1861, Flag Officer Stringham was ordered to transfer command of the Atlantic Blockading Squadron to Captain Louis M. Goldsborough; and on the 23d the latter announces his arrival at Hampton Roads, having assumed command and hoisted his flag on the Minnesota.

BATTLE WITH THE MERRIMAC AT HAMPTON ROADS.

The most important affair in which the Minnesota took part, and one of the most important events in history, was that of March 8, 1862, at Hampton Roads, Va., when, on her way to the assistance of the Congress and the Cumberland, attacked by the Confederate ironclad Merrimac, the Minnesota ran aground. From 4 until 7 o'clock p. m., while lying aground, she engaged the Merrimac and the two steam gunboats, Patrick Henry and Jamestown. The Minnesota's broadsides, however, did no damage to the Merrimac. The Congress was captured and destroyed, and the Cumberland sunk; but the Minnesota was saved by the approaching darkness and the fear of the Merrimac's pilots to enter that channel. The Merrimac and her two consorts anchored off Sewall's Point, expecting to return in the morning and capture 95 or destroy the Minnesota; and, without doubt, this would have happened but for the timely arrival of the Monitor, at 2 o'clock a. m. of the 9th. The day of her arrival dates the revolutionizing of naval architecture, the beginning of the end of wooden ships of war. The events of the 9th are so familiar to every one, it seems unnecessary to recite the details; the Minnesota was spared to take part in other conflicts, and the Merrimac was defeated.

Library of Congress

The Merrimac came out again on April 11th and again on May 8th, which was her last appearance, as she was soon afterward destroyed to prevent her falling into the hands of the Union Navy.

This battle at Hampton Roads brought the Minnesota into greater prominence than the part she took in any previous or subsequent events; and her name will always be associated with those of the Monitor, Congress, Cumberland, and the Merrimac.

The Minnesota was the flagship of Admiral Samuel P. Lee, at the Navy Yard of Portsmouth, N. H., from October 30, 1862, until January 2, 1863; was blockading off Wilmington, N. C., in August, 1863; and later until January, 1864, was at Newport News, Va. On January 11, 1864, the Minnesota captured a blockade runner, the Ranger, off Folly Inlet, N. C.; and on February 1, 1864, took part in a disastrous joint expedition near Smithfield, Va.

CAPTURE OF FORT FISHER.

On December 24 and 25, 1864, the Minnesota was present and took part in the first attack on Fort Fisher, N. C., which was unsuccessful. In the second assault on that fort, January 13–15, 1865, which resulted in its capture, followed by the fall of Wilmington, N. C., our good ship was, as at the capture of Forts Hatteras and Clark, in the advanced line. In a description of the bombardment, I find this account of the Minnesota: "The Ironsides was followed by the Minnesota, Colorado, and Wabash. The enemy replied briskly, but when these frigates found the range and commenced firing rapidly, nothing could withstand their broadsides 96 of twenty-five 9-inch guns. It was a magnificent sight to see these frigates fairly engaged, and one never to be forgotten."

A full narration of this event, as well as that of Hampton Roads, would require, as other writers have supplied, greater descriptive powers than I possess. I can say, however, that I regret that a storm off Cape Hatteras, delaying the transport on which my regiment, the

Library of Congress

Eighth Minnesota. had left Washington, prevented my presence, though it might not have counted for much, until four hours after the capture of the fort. I may mention, also, that the only time I saw the Minnesota was off Fort Fisher. A part of the Twenty-third Army Corps, including the Eighth Minnesota, arrived in time to take part in operations by land.

With the fall of Fort Fisher, the Minnesota ended her active career,—we may say that it was a well earned retirement.

LATER HISTORY OF THIS FRIGATE.

On February 16, 1865, the Minnesota is reported out of commission at the Portsmouth Navy Yard: and from that date until 1876, excepting 1868, when she is reported as on special service, which is not specified, she was at New York and at New London, Conn., reported as under repairs.

From 1876 to 1879, the Minnesota was used as a trainingship; was in 1880 at New London, Conn., in the same service; and again at New York in 1881. On January 1, 1882, she was stricken from the Navy Register, which ended her official existence.

October 22, 1895, she was loaned to Massachusetts for a naval military training-ship, in accordance with an act passed by Congress on August 3, 1894. The Minnesota appears to have been used for the purpose specified until 1901, when, in the manner provided by an act of Congress in 1883, she was condemned and offered for sale by the Navy Department, July 17, 1901. The appraised value of the ship was fixed at \$15,000 by a "Board of Survey." She was sold to Thomas Butler and Company of Boston, Mass., for \$25,738.38, much exceeding the appraised value.

97

Thus ends the history of as gallant a ship as ever sailed upon the seas. Although her timbers and equipment are, no doubt, resting in piecemeal in a junk shop, her name is

Library of Congress

emblazoned in the history of the United States which she so well served; and now we add it to that of the State whose name she honored by her achievements.

The following are the names of the officers who commanded the old frigate Minnesota during her naval service: Captain Samuel F. Du Pont, 1855 to 1859; Captain Gershom J. Van Brunt, May 2, 1861, to August 12, 1862; Lieutenant Commander Edward C. Grafton, August 12, 1862, to September 30, 1862; Commander Napoleon B. Harrison, September 30, 1862, to November 20, 1863; Lieutenant Commander Joseph P. Fyffe, November 20, 1863, to December 9, 1863; Lieutenant Commander John H. Upshur, December 9, 1863, to October 1, 1864; and Commodore Joseph Lanman, October 1, 1864, to February 16, 1865.